

Canadian and Swedish Academic Experiences: A Compare and Contrast

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SUMMARY

As a survey-engineering student at Lund University, I have spent the last four years dedicated to the subjects and issues concerning land survey. Three years were spent in Lund; while my last year was spent abroad in Montreal Canada continuing with identical studies. My time in Montreal was not without difficulties. These difficulties, and more so differences, form the basis for this abstract. I will compare and contrast my academic experiences in both countries.

When I began my program in Lund, it certainly felt like the beginning of most classes I have previously attended. Thirty students including myself attended the same classes. Of course as a part of a program it was requisite that we did so. Two and a half years were directed toward fundamentals to give us background, while the remaining time allowed each student to focus on a specific direction within the sphere of land survey. In Montreal we had more classes to choose from, and there were a greater number of students in the program. What resulted was a situation where all my classes were with different people, and as a new student to Canada it was difficult to connect with other students; whereas in Sweden I knew my fellow students.

In terms of being tested on relevant material, Montreal was by far the more confusing of both my experiences. The examinations were very dissimilar. In Lund, the academic year was divided in four sections over seven weeks, each section with an examination week. Whereas in Montreal we didn't have formal testing periods in which exams were administered. Instead, work was dispersed in the form of projects and papers amongst student groups. This might not have been abnormal, however, each student was required to work as a 'team' player, yet submit ones own [single] work independent of the others. When similar projects were assigned to me in Sweden, we always had three or four 'small' hand-ins before the final project was to be completed, and all efforts were combined or at the least considered for completed works. In Montreal we weren't required to submit anything until the final report was requested. I found that to be very frustrating, as it was difficult to gauge my understanding of relevant material without critique and feedback. This last comment is in my case logically prior to what came next.

What I found to be the case in Montreal, more often than not was that the relation between students and professors was either altogether non-existent or was terribly disorganized. In Lund we have always had sufficient access and communication with our professors. Where these conditions could not be met, we were given advanced notice so that arrangements could be made otherwise. By default of being a 'student', it is assumed that until I have completed my studies and have been certified by the respective University, I am in fact not in a position of 'knowing' what has in fact been taught to me. Guidance and support from professors is as I

see it, requisite for the academic learning process, and this process does not end until I have a 'piece of paper' stating so.

I have always had support from my professors in Sweden, and it was never a problem to go and request assistance; that's the learning process! Whereas in Montreal that process was hindered by a lack of input on matters I deemed worthy of attention; it 'felt' as though I was bothering the professors, if they could be reached whatsoever! One professor left the country without notice shortly before final projects were done. This is when one needs a professor the most, the critical stages before completion when 'touch ups' are necessary. As a result of this one instance, I didn't receive a final grade until many months after I finished and returned to Sweden.

Other differences came in the form of 'structure'. Lund University in Sweden follows a system where exams and deadlines were specifically given prior to the beginning of classes. Syllabuses provided requisite information and email addresses of professors in case of schedule changes. The University of Montreal lacked an equivalent level of structure. All the deadlines were 'floating' insofar as they changed many times, and no notification was ever given when classes were cancelled, nor were reasonable reasons ever provided. I never once received an apology, and saw no accountability or a level of equality and justice. Without structure and consistency, and a level of respect whatever form that might take, there exists only chaos. My experiences in Montreal were at times chaotic.

There was one aspect of my experience in Montreal that left a lasting impression on me in the positive sense. Students had an opportunity to do some field studies and this included a trip to St Louis, Senegal. I found it meaningful to combine theory with what is actually occurring in the 'real' world. The University of Montreal provided an opportunity that had not been presented to me before. In Senegal, students presented a project to the Municipalities in St Louis with the hopes that our years of education may benefit others in need. I gained a level of experience in Senegal unmatched anywhere in my academic endeavors, and have actually seen first hand how the situations in other countries differ drastically. The insight and perspective I have received as a result of this fieldwork is priceless.

My years of University study have of course contributed to my mode of thought today, and this includes both 'positive' and 'negative' experiences. There is room for ambiguity concerning what is positive and negative, as both can entail 'enriching' experiences. In the strictest sense, a 'negative' experience is referred to here as a situation where a lack of requisite conditions was not met, and this affected my learning process. The use of 'positive' is exactly the opposite; all requisite conditions were achieved.

I have grown as a person mentally, emotionally, and physically as a result of the differences of experiences between my time spent in Canada and time spent in Sweden. In terms of my academic experiences, I have constructed an opinion as a result: the learning process is marked by curves, bumps, and unavoidable detours. At the very least we ought to strive toward an academic system that is as free from problems and discrepancies as is humanly possible.

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